XXIII.—*Description of the Snake-nut Tree of Guiana.* By Robert H. Schomburgk, C.M. R.G.S.*

[With a Plate.]

For several years past nuts of the size of a walnut were brought from the interior to Georgetown in Demerara, the kernel of which when opened, and the membrane which covered it being removed, displayed the striking resemblance to a snake 'coiled up.' There was the head, the mouth, the eyes, so complete, that one unacquainted with the fact would have believed them to be an imitation made by human hands, and not a freak of nature. As is often the case with the productions of the interior, the colonists were entirely unacquainted with the mode of growth of the plant which produced these strange nuts.

They were generally found after the annual swelling of the Essequibo had subsided along its banks, and for a length of time it was pretended that they grew on a creeper; and from the resemblance of its kernel to a snake, it was supposed that it might prove an antidote to snake-poison. After my return from the interior of British Guiana, and while at the post Ampa at the Essequibo, I ascertained from Mr. Richardson, then postholder, that the snake-nut was the fruit of a large tree, and that several grew in the vicinity of his abode. I therefore embraced the first opportunity to ascend the brook Ampa in order to see it.

The tree stood near the banks of the brook, as also did other trees of the same description which I saw afterwards, and this explains its fruits being so frequently found along the low banks of the islands Leguan, Wakenaam, &c., on the mouth of the Essequibo.

The tree was just about ceasing to bear for the season, and began to put forth its blossoms; unfortunately they were not far enough advanced to determine without hesitation its class and order, but there is no doubt that it belongs to the natural order of *Terebinthaceæ*, nearly related to the division *Ju-*

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*glandiæ**. All the buds which I opened consisted apparently of 3 stamens and 1 pistil; the calyx was imbricated, and this might have induced me to consider it a *Carya* or *Juglans*; but the leaves of the tree in question are smooth and entire, while those of the others, with the exception of two species, are serrated.

It is not a *Carya*, the nut of which is 4-angulated and 4-valved, while the nut of *Juglans*, as well as the snake-nut, is 2-valved. I had requested Mr. Richardson to procure me some of the flowers of the Snake-nut tree when perfectly open, but he did not succeed in drying them, which unfortunately prevented him from sending any, and I am thus obliged to wait for another opportunity of correctly describing this remarkable plant. I offer the following description meanwhile provisionally.

Order. Terebinthaceæ.

Calyx imbricatus. Corolla 3-petala. Drupa bivalvis. 1-sperma.

Vulg. Snake-nut tree.

Arbor excelsa, truncus glaber, cortice lævi cinereo. Folia pinnata; foliola petiolata 3—6-juga cum impari, lanceolato-ovata, acuminata, integerrima, subcoriacea, venosa, glabra, nitida. Petioli universales supra canaliculati, glabri, articulati, partiales breves. Flores paniculati; paniculæ in ramulis terminales subinde axillares; ramosæ; floribus brevissime pedicellatis, numerosis confertis. Calyx imbricatus. Corolla 3-petala, ovata, concava. Drupa coriacea unisperma, unilocularis, glabra, sphærica. Nux dura, glabra, bivalvis, unilocularis; nucleo albo.

Hab. in sylvis Guianæ prope fluvium Essequibo. Floret Aprili.

It is a tree of the first magnitude; its bark is gray, rather smooth, dividing in a few branches at a height of from 40 to 60 feet, adorned with pinnated leaves, consisting generally of four to six pairs with an odd one; the common foot-stalk as well as the petioles are articulated, the former channeled; the leaves entire, lanceolate, ovate, acuminate, lucid, coriaceous, their colour between light and dark green, with a shade lighter below. The flowers appear in panicles, are pendulous, and the flower-stalks of red-brown colour, almost farinaceous, chiefly the smaller flower-stalks; verticillate and

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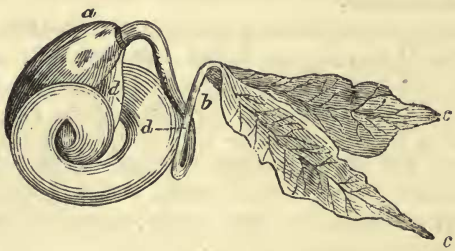
sparely flowered; the calyx is imbricated, the corolla has 3 petals, ovate and concave, and is of a lilac colour.

What is most remarkable is however the fruit, a thin coriaceous drupa, with a smooth nut, the kernel of which resembles a snake most strikingly.

It is covered like the walnut with a membrane; the embryo is roundish; the head of the snake becomes a claviform radicle, and the tail (Mirbel's *scapellus* or DeCandolle's '*tigelle*') bears two large foliaceous cotyledons, with several nerves, depressed, plaited, and applied to the radicle; the colour of the embryo and cotyledons is white, but the nerves of the latter are of a lake colour; as soon as exposed to the air they change into a dark-brown. When the fruit is about to germinate, the *scapellus* or '*tigelle*' bends towards the base of the cotyledons, bursts the nut, and having made room for the seed-lobes, they unfold and take an erect situation, while the rhizoma has sent its roots into the earth.



No trials have been made whether the tree or its fruit possess any medicinal properties: as already observed, the resemblance of a snake has induced the populace to consider it an antidote for snake-poison. The tree appears to be peculiar to the lower part of the river Essequibo and its tributaries, at least it has not as yet been found anywhere else. It blossoms in March and April, and its fruit comes to maturity in November.

The above figure exhibits the appearance of the embryo after the outer shell has been removed: *a*, is the radicle or rhizoma; *b*, the neck, tigelle, or collet; *c*, the two cotyledons, which have been unfolded, as they are otherwise applied to *d d*, and partly surround the embryo.

The figures in Plate III. represent the Nut and its snake-like Kernel.

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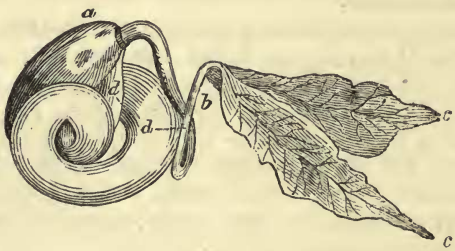

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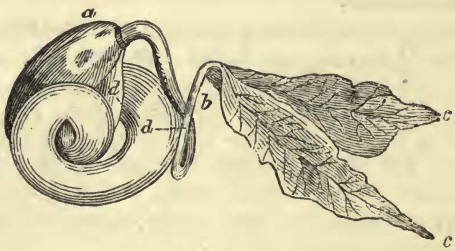

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